

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
January 29, 2004

GLEASON PROPERTY ACQUISITION

File No. 03-154
Project Manager: Ann Buell

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$2,200,000 to the East Bay Regional Park District toward its acquisition of the 673-acre Gleason property in Contra Costa County.

LOCATION: Unincorporated central Contra Costa County, near the Cities of Walnut Creek and Lafayette, adjacent to Las Trampas Regional Wilderness (Exhibit 1)

PROGRAM CATEGORY: San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: Location Map
 - Exhibit 2: Parcel Map
 - Exhibit 3: Photographs of Project Site
 - Exhibit 4: East Bay Regional Park District Map
 - Exhibit 5: Letters of Support
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RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31000 *et seq.* of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed two million two hundred thousand dollars (\$2,200,000) to the East Bay Regional Park District toward the acquisition of the 673-acre Gleason property in Contra Costa County, Assessor Parcel Numbers 189-090-002; 189-090-006; 189-090-007; 189-090-008; 189-090-009; 189-110-003; 189-110-004; 258-020-003; 258-030-001; 258-040-001, as shown on Exhibit 2 to the accompanying Staff Recommendation, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of any Conservancy funds for acquisition, the East Bay Regional Park District shall:
 - a. Submit for review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (the "Executive Officer") all relevant acquisition documents including but not limited to, the ap-

praisal, agreement(s) of purchase and sale, escrow instructions and documents of title; and

- b. Dedicate the property for open space, habitat conservation and public access, and as a wildlife corridor, in a manner acceptable to the Executive Officer.
2. The East Bay Regional Park District shall have paid no more than fair market value for the property, as established in an appraisal approved by the Executive Officer.
3. Conservancy funding shall be acknowledged by erecting and maintaining on the property a sign that has been reviewed and approved by the Executive Officer."

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

"Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed project is consistent with Public Resources Code Sections 31160-31164, regarding the Conservancy's mandate to address the resource and recreational goals of the San Francisco Bay Area.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001."

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff requests authorization to disburse up to \$2,200,000 to the East Bay Regional Park District (EBRPD) toward the acquisition of the 673-acre Gleason property adjacent to Las Trampas Regional Wilderness in Contra Costa County. EBRPD acquired this property on December 30, 2003 for \$3,700,000. Per an agreement between EBRPD and the land owners, EBRPD had the option to purchase the property at this price if the transaction were completed by December 30; otherwise, the purchase price would have been \$4,000,000. This authorization would allow the Conservancy to reimburse EBRPD for a portion of this purchase.

The Gleason property is characterized by rolling grasslands and densely wooded slopes with panoramic views of Mt. Diablo and its foothills (Exhibit 3). The property ridgeline dominates the viewshed of the surrounding urban areas of Walnut Creek, Lafayette, and Moraga, as well as the heavily used Interstate 680 transportation corridor. Although topography, soils, and water supply would naturally limit residential development on this property, the current agricultural zoning would allow several additional ranchettes to be built if this property remained on the open market. The result would be a significant degradation of the ridge's value as a wildlife corridor for the greater Diablo Ridgelines complex.

Staff prioritizes this acquisition because it will preserve the area's most prominent ridgeline, protect wildlife corridors, preserve open space, allow continued agricultural use of the land, and expand recreational opportunities already established at EBRPD's adjacent Las Trampas Regional Wilderness Park (Exhibit 2). Riparian areas are densely wooded, permanent water sources exist at springs and ponds, and several intermittent tributaries of Grizzly Creek and Las Trampas Creek meander through the property. Although presence of these species has not been verified, the property contains habitat suitable for mountain lion, coyote, deer, golden eagle, Cooper's

hawk, sharp-shinned hawk, white-tailed kite, Alameda whipsnake, California red-legged frog, and California tiger salamander.

This acquisition will expand Las Trampas Regional Wilderness one and a half miles northward, increasing the park's acreage to almost 5,000 acres. The Las Trampas Regional Wilderness park allows hiking, picnicking, bicycling, horseback riding, and other passive recreational activities. EBRPD is also pursuing acquisition of the 270-acre Hansen property to the east, and if successful the local trail system will be greatly increased. Even without the Hansen property, the Gleason property will provide an important link in the Las Trampas to Briones Regional Trail, a segment of the Calaveras Ridge Trail, and will offer approximately one mile of its own trails along the dirt roads already present on the property. EBRPD plans to incorporate a triangular inholding within the Gleason property (see Exhibit 2) into Las Trampas Regional Wilderness as well, and will dedicate that parcel to the same purposes as the Gleason property when the incorporation is accomplished.

EBRPD, established in 1934, owns and manages 65 parks and more than 95,250 acres of land in Alameda and Contra Costa Counties for public recreational enjoyment and the preservation of open space, wildlife habitat, and viewsheds (Exhibit 4). EBRPD also manages grazing leases on many of its properties, as it will on the Gleason property.

Site Description: This rural property consists of ten contiguous parcels comprising 673 acres in unincorporated Contra Costa County (Assessor Parcel Numbers 189-090-002; 189-090-006; 189-090-007; 189-090-008; 189-090-009; 189-110-003; 189-110-004; 258-020-003; 258-030-001; 258-040-001). It is located southeast of Moraga and Lafayette, between Hunsacker Canyon Road and Bollinger Canyon Road, both of which provide access to the property (from the north and south, respectively). There are rough dirt roads passable by four-wheel drive over portions of the property, and some extend through the adjacent Hansen property to Las Trampas Regional Wilderness to the east. Topography is variable from level valley floors to steep slopes, with elevations ranging from 680 to 1,626 feet. Las Trampas Ridge bisects the property, separating the drainage into Las Trampas Creek and Grizzly Creek. Portions of the site are heavily wooded, but most areas are grassy hillsides.

Grazing, open space, and wildlife habitat are suitable uses for the majority of the property, with potential for a limited number of home sites. The site is currently grazed. Densely wooded riparian areas on the property contain coast live oak, valley oak, California bay, big leaf maple, buckeye, and black walnut. Permanent water sources exist at various creeks, springs, and ponds. Diverse plant communities include oak/bay woodland, riparian areas, chaparral, and grassland with rock outcrops.

Buildings currently on the site are located on APN 258-030-001, a parcel with access from Bollinger Canyon Road (Exhibit 2). Improvements include a main residence dating from the early 1950s, a detached concrete block garage/shop building, an additional detached wood-framed garage, an older cottage, and a stable. A spring feeds a water storage tank and serves the residence.

The property is outside the Contra Costa County Urban Limit Line and is zoned A-2, General Agricultural District. Virtually all agricultural uses are allowed under this zoning, with one residential unit per parcel with a minimum size of five acres.

Project History: Based on habitat, location, size, recreational potential, access, views, and condition, the acquisition of the Gleason property is EBRPD's highest priority for Conservancy Proposition 40 funding this year (see "Project Summary" and "Site Description" above). After more than a decade of negotiations with the owners, the Gleason property was brought under option in July 2003 with a provision for a \$3,700,000 purchase price if the acquisition were completed by December 30, 2003, but a \$4,000,000 purchase price thereafter. Conservancy staff work load and board schedule precluded staff from seeking board authorization prior to December 30, 2003, and thus staff is seeking authorization for funding after the close of escrow. Conservancy project and legal staff worked closely with EBRPD staff to ensure that the project developed in a manner consistent with Conservancy legislative mandates, guidelines, and goals.

In 2002 the Conservancy helped EBRPD with the Mueller property acquisition (\$438,750), which added 196 acres to the opposite side of Las Trampas Regional Wilderness. Negotiations for the neighboring Hansen property continue.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$2,200,000
East Bay Regional Park District	<u>1,708,000</u>
Total Project Cost	\$3,908,000

The Conservancy's contribution of \$2,200,000 is expected to come from the Conservancy's FY 02/03 appropriation from the "California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks and Coastal Protection Act of 2002" (Proposition 40) appropriation for the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program. This proposed authorization is consistent with the funding source because this project would result in the acquisition and protection of land and water resources.

Committed matching funds totaling \$1,708,000 for this proposed project will come from various East Bay Regional Park District (EBRPD) sources. Total project costs listed above the \$3.7 million purchase price for the property reflect acquisition-related expenses and immediate capital improvements such as fencing. Conservancy funds will be applied toward the purchase price only.

EBRPD is contributing less than 50 percent of the funds needed to complete this acquisition, but it has provided a greater than 50 percent match on many other projects completed in cooperation with the Conservancy. EBRPD has acquired dozens of other properties using AA Bond funds without any Conservancy support, and is expending the last of its AA Bond funds allocated for this project area of its jurisdiction on this project.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

This project is undertaken pursuant to Chapter 4.5 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Public Resources Code Sections 31160-31164, to address resource goals in the San Francisco Bay Area. In particular, the Conservancy may award grants to protect, restore, and enhance natural habitats and connecting corridors, watersheds, scenic areas, and other open-space resources of regional significance (§31162(b)); and promote, assist, and enhance projects that provide open space and natural areas that are accessible to urban populations for recreational and educational purposes (§31162(d)). This project will protect a significant section of the Las Trampas ridgeline corridor and will be added to EBRPD's Las Trampas Regional Wilderness Park, greatly increas-

ing the open space and natural areas available to the populations of Alameda and Contra Costa Counties and beyond.

This project is appropriate for prioritization under the selection criteria set forth in §31163(d) in that (1) it is consistent with EBRPD's 1997 Master Plan and the open space elements of the Contra Costa County General Plan; (2) it serves a regional constituency as part of EBRPD's park system, which attracts visitors from the entire East Bay region; (3) the completion of the acquisition before the end of December 2003 took advantage of the lower purchase price that otherwise would have been lost; and (4) the proposal includes matching funds from other sources as described under the "Project Financing" section above.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S
STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with **Goal 10, Objective A**, the proposed project will result in the acquisition of 673 contiguous acres of upland habitat in Contra Costa County.

Consistent with **Goal 11, Objective A**, the proposed project will result in a significant increase in land that will be accessible to the public for recreational purposes, including an additional mile of hiking trail, when this property is added to the Las Trampas Regional Wilderness.

Consistent with **Goal 12, Objective A**, the proposed project will protect 673 acres of agricultural lands identified in the General Plan of Contra Costa County.

Protection of this ridgeline corridor is consistent with the Conservancy's Strategic Plan project area goal of preserving the Las Trampas Ridge.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S
PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** This project is supported by State Senator Tom Torlakson, former Contra Costa County Supervisor Donna Gerber, former Assemblywoman Dion Aroner, the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors, the communities of Lafayette, Orinda, and Moraga, the Department of Fish and Game, the Mt. Diablo Audubon Society, and the Muir Heritage Land Trust (Exhibit 5).
4. **Location:** The Gleason property is located wholly within Contra Costa County and thus is within the jurisdiction of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program. This acquisition is contiguous with Las Trampas Regional Wilderness and public hiking, biking, and horse-

back riding opportunities will easily be extended into the Gleason property on existing fire roads.

5. **Need:** EBRPD has committed all the funds it can at this time to complete this acquisition while planning for another important acquisition (the Hansen property) that is contiguous with both the Gleason property and Las Trampas Regional Wilderness. EBRPD considers these two properties to be the most significant remaining undeveloped land in Contra Costa County and the opportunity to secure both could be lost without Conservancy support.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** This acquisition will bring the total acreage in the Las Trampas Regional Wilderness to approximately 4,730 acres, making it one of the most inviting natural areas in the San Francisco Bay Area for passive recreation while maintaining a ridgeline corridor for wildlife and a beautiful vista for millions of people in transit on Interstate Highway 680.

Additional Criteria

8. **Resolution of more than one issue:** Acquisition of the Gleason property will add 673 acres to regional public recreational areas, will prevent development, will retain agricultural usage of the property (grazing), and will protect viewsheds for the surrounding urban areas and transportation corridors.
9. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** The Conservancy has contributed funding to other acquisitions in the vicinity of Las Trampas Regional Wilderness and Mount Diablo State Park and is an active member of the Diablo Ridgeland Working Group. This group has prioritized protection of open space and wildlife corridors in the ridgeland of Alameda, Contra Costa, and Santa Clara Counties.
15. **Cooperation:** The owners of the Gleason property were willing sellers.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

As a transfer of ownership of interest in land to preserve open space and habitat, including acquisition for the preservation and restoration of natural conditions, the proposed project is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15325. The project is also exempt under §15313, which provides a categorical exemption for the acquisition of lands for fish and wildlife conservation, including preservation of fish and wildlife habitat, where the purpose of the acquisition is to preserve the land in its natural condition. Upon approval, staff will file a Notice of Exemption for this project.